

For Immediate Release
December 10, 2009

Contact: Gordan Milosevic
+ 387 65 400 721
g.milosevic@vladars.net

Washington, D.C. Conference Reveals Changing Sentiment on Constitutional Reform in Bosnia-Herzegovina

WASHINGTON – Yesterday, the U.S. Institute of Peace held a conference which put to question the need for constitutional reform in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). Several participants were highly critical of the internationally-brokered “Butmir Process,” demonstrating a broadening consensus that attempts by the international community to impose structural or constitutional change on Bosnia-Herzegovina will inevitably fail. Laurel Miller, Senior Policy Analyst for RAND Corporation, indicated the internal consensus needed for reform “cannot be manufactured by outside actors” and that involvement of foreign diplomats carrying their unique agendas “distorts the process and result.”

Moreover, the conference participants showed a growing awareness that any revisions to Dayton and the BiH constitution must be undertaken by those living within BiH and in the context of requirements put forth by the European Union for accession. James O’Brien, Principal of the Albright Stonebridge Group, indicated that without a clear set of goals, it is difficult to expect leaders to negotiate.

Robert Hayden, Director of the University of Pittsburgh’s Center for Russian and East European Studies, noted that Bosnia-Herzegovina is a stable country similar in structure to EU-member Belgium. In fact, he stated that “attempts to centralize are likely to destabilize” because centralization, like that promoted in the “Butmir Packages,” undermines the security guaranteed to Bosnia’s constituent peoples.

Some attending the conference suggested that the real problem is failure by the United States and the European Union to develop a common approach to constitutional reform in BiH. However, Ambassador Ralph Johnson, President of QGA International and a registered foreign agent representing the Republika Srpska (the Serb entity in BiH), commented that “such suggestions miss the point entirely, as the problem doesn’t seem to be a lack coordination by the international community as much as it is their intervention in the process.” The conference, entitled “Is Constitutional Reform in Bosnia a Good Idea?”, was moderated by Dan Serwer, Chair of the Balkans Working Group at USIP, and also included Bruce Hitchner, Chairman of the Dayton Peace Accords Project.

The Prime Minister of the Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, has long been a champion of decentralized government and an organic constitutional reform process free of foreign intervention. This conference follows the visit by a delegation of RS officials to Washington last month, who conveyed similar messages in meetings with several U.S. lawmakers.

Source: Liz McCurtain, Quinn Gillespie & Associates
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